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ABSTRACT

The following are some techniques for adding depth to a survey course in mythology: (1) allow students to generate their own list of important mythological characters on which they are to be tested; (2) use films; (3) compare and contrast characters of different mythology systems using discussions, written assignments, and comparison grids; (4) have students keep written journals; and (5) assign in-depth semester projects which include oral reports and written handouts. (DC)

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A Survey Course in Mythology: Is It Possible?

I would like to share some techniques I have used in my survey course, Mythology and Folklore, to add depth and scope to what otherwise might be a surface gallop through time and cultures. Mainly these ideas center around use of student/teacher, in-class test making; use of films, with previewing, discussion and writing; comparison-contrast writing assignments and discussion sessions; spiraling or going back to pick up points from previously studied gods or creation stories by using grids; use of journal writing by students; and semester projects in which students share their findings with the class members.

Student-teacher test making: I ask students to choose what they believe to be the most important gods, goddesses, heroes, creatures in the mythologies we study. We come up with an agreed-upon list, and I make the tests from that list. This involves students in important decisions and cuts down on their frustration in trying to study too many of the hundreds of, for example, Greek characters.

Films: Films can compress centuries into 30 minutes. One film I show is "The Glory That Remains: The Thousand Year Walk," which in 31 minutes tours the Valley of the Kings and Karnak and covers 10 centuries of Egyptian history and mythology. I always put on the board before the film any unfamiliar terms or names that will be in the film, and we always follow with a short recapitulation of the major points. Much information can be given to students through carefully selected films. The University of Illinois has a wonderful selection of films for rent reasonably on mythology.

Comparison-Contrast assignments and discussion: Rather than studying various mythology systems in isolation, I prefer to spiral back to the previously studied one and compare the god (s) of one with the gods of another, or the hero of one with the hero of another. For example, one assignment I give, after we have studied the Odyssey earlier in the semester, and after I have shown the film Shane, is to ask the students to give me some of the similarities and differences in Greece's hero Odysseus and in the American West's hero, Shane. We use a grid on the blackboard with qualities such as physical strength; intelligence; personality traits, such as taciturnity versus loquaciousness; loyalty. After this discussion, I ask students to write a paper on this subject of the differences in the two heroes and what these differences show about the two cultures. Grids can be assigned as homework or done impromptu on the blackboard. For example, I might list 3 or 4 gods we have studied such as Zeus of the Greeks, Yahweh of the Hebrews, Odin of the Norsemen and down the side list qualities such as---a loving god? sexual or asexual? all-powerful? human characteristics? The students then can be sent to their books and notes to fill in the spaces on the grid and a discussion can follow. Following the discussion or as part of it the students should be asked to draw a few conclusions about the relative cultures and what is important to them.

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Journals: The idea of journals is not new, of course; however, I think it is particularly important to ask the students in a survey course in mythology to keep notes and to write about their feelings about the myths; about connections they may make with other myths and with their own lives; about their reactions to discussion and films. I give the journal as an optional substitution for a major test. I recommend the journal over the test because, I believe, the student then takes away with him a good record of what he has learned and he has a resource book for further readings.

Semester Projects: At the end of the semester, students must do an oral project which includes handout sheets for each class member, either dittoed or somehow duplicated. These projects should focus on some aspect of the course which we could not deal with in depth because of time, but one that the student became interested in and wanted to pursue. The handout sheets could be annotated bibliographies, or outlines, or some other printed manifestation of what the student is presenting orally. The oral presentations could be in the form of a simple speech, or accompanied with audio visual aids such as slides or tapes. (If your school has the equipment, you could provide these machines for the students.) I have had students who wrote their own myths; students who reported on numerology, on taro cards, on the planets, on witchcraft, on humanistic astrology, on American Indian myths, the possibilities being endless.

These approaches help, I think, to add some depth to the survey course.

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